ROUTTENBERG

Boston University
Graduate School

Thesis

The Rabbinic Interpretation of the Eighth Century Prophets

by

Hyman Jacob Routtenberg
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(d) Remes (hint, indications contained in seemingly superfluous letters).

(e) Derush (homiletic interpretation).

(f) Sod (secret, mystery, the Secret Science).

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Vlll. Summary.

Introductory

From the subject of the thesis one should not be led to believe that there is to be found in the writings of the Rabbis a systematic treatment of the eighth century prophets. That is not so, just as there is no systematic treatment of any of the other prophets. In fact, one who is at all familiar with that monumental work of the Rabbis known as the Talmud, knows very well that there is not a single subject in the Talmud that is dealt with systematically. The Talmud itself realized this lack of coordination in the treatment of its material when on more than one occasion it expressed itself by saying, "There is no order to the Mishnah." (The Mishnah is one of the two parts in which the Talmud is divided.) Emanuel Deutch, who has written a dissertation on the Talmud, pictures how amazed the modern investigator would be at the first sight of the "luxuriant Talmudical wildernesses." Thus he says, "Schooled in the harmonizing, methodizing systems of the West--systems that condense, and arrange, and classify, and give everything its fitting place and its fitting position in that place--he feels almost stupefied here. The language, the style, the method, the very sequence of things, the amazingly varied nature of these things--everything seems tangled, confused, chaotic."[1]

It is perfectly clear, therefore, that it is utterly

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[1]Deutch, The Talmud, p. 24

impossible to turn to a particular portion of the Talmud in order to find out what the Rabbis have to say about Amos or Hosea. References to the prophets and interpretations of various prophetic passages are scattered throughout the length and breadth of what is often called "the Sea of the Talmud." In order to obtain the Rabbinic view of the various prophets one must therefore cull out each of these references separately and then group them systematically under each of the prophets under consideration.

The Rabbinic interpretation of the prophets will obviously be found to be much at variance with that of the so-called Higher Criticism, for the very attitude of the two schools towards the Scriptures is very much different. Whereas the one approaches the Scriptures with a deep sense of awe and reverence for the inspired word of God, the other approaches it wholly objectively and unemotionally, just as it would approach any other branch of literature. To the Rabbis every word of Scripture is sacred and therefore flawless. There can be no such thing as a corruption of the text and the need for an emendation. Similarly the Rabbis were not faced with the problem of authorship and the authenticity of various passages. The Rabbis were first and foremost traditionalists. Whatever was handed down, therefore, as coming from a certain prophet was accepted 'in toto' as absolutely authentic. Only in one instance do we find a certain passage ascribed to a prophet other than the one in whose book the passage is found. Thus we find the Rabbis say that Beeri, the father of Hosea, is the author of verses 19 and 20 of the

8th chapter of Isaiah.[1]

Though it is unquestionably true that the Rabbis were primarily traditionalists in their interpretation of Scripture, it would nevertheless be a mistake to assume that they were wholly uncritical in their treatment thereof. The Rabbis were quick to discover contradictory passages, and always sought assiduously to reconcile them. However, what may present itself as a difficulty to the modern Biblical scholars was often no difficulty at all to the Rabbis because of the difference in their point of view. A good illustration of that would be the question of the authorship of chapters 40-66 in Isaiah. According to the modern critics these chapters cannot possibly come from the pen of Isaiah for they are definitely post-exilic, whereas Isaiah lived long before the exile. The Rabbis, however, did not find it necessary to reach such a conclusion. To them these latter chapters of Isaiah also appeared as post-exilic, but it does not follow from that they were therefore written at a later date. Not at all. We must not forget that Isaiah was a prophet and therefore knew that the Israelites would at some future date be driven into exile. It isn't at all strange, therefore, that Isaiah should address himself to the future exiles with the soothing words of "Comfort ye, comfort ye, my people."

One more word regarding the value of the Rabbinic interpretations and their sources. It should be remembered

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[1]Leviticus R. 15, 2.

that the interpretations of the Rabbis go back directly as far as one and two hundred years before the Christian era, and that many of these interpretations probably represent an oral tradition that goes back even further than that. It therefore ought to be both fascinating and instructive to students of History and Bible to know what these ancient traditions are regarding the lives and teachings of the prophets.

The sources for the Rabbinic interpretation are in the main the Babylonian Talmud, the Palestinian Talmud, the various Midrashim, and the commentators of the Middle Ages, such as Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and others.

Chapter 1

The Rabbinic View of Prophecy

In attempting to discover what the Rabbinic view of prophecy is in general one is confronted with the same chaotic disorganization that exists in the Talmud with regard to the interpretation of the various prophetic passages. It should be noted at the outset that the Rabbis were not philosophers in the speculative sense. They never theorized about such problems as the existence of God, good and evil, immortality, etc. They took many things for granted without raising any questions about them. And what is true of other things is also true of prophecy. The Rabbis did not philosophize or speculate about the nature of prophecy, whether it was a state of ecstasy or enthusiasm or some other form of experience. To the Rabbis, prophecy implied the visitation of the Holy Spirit which comes directly from God upon certain select individuals. This visitation of the Holy Spirit is in fulfillment of God's promise to raise up prophets in Israel and put His words in their mouth that they should deliver them to the people.[1]

Prophecy is then, according to the Rabbis, a direct revelation from God. In fact, it is spoken of as "the word of God,"[2] and the continuation of His voice which was heard on Mount Sinai.[3] That does not mean, however, that there are not various

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[1]Deut. 18:15ff.

[2]Shabbath, 138b.

[3]Sifre, 92a

degrees of prophecy or different forms of prophetic vision. The divine revelation to Moses was not of the same nature as the revelation to the other prophets. Whereas the revelation to Moses was made "mouth to mouth" (num. 12:6-8), and "face to face" (Deut. 34:10), the revelations to the other prophets were usually made through dreams and visions.

Thus in commenting on the passage in Deuteronomy, "And there hath not arisen a prophet since in Israel like unto Moses" (34:10) the Rabbis say, "All the prophets beheld their visions through dim spectacles as it is said, 'And by the ministry of the prophets have I used similitudes' (Hosea 12:11); Moses, however, beheld his as through a clear glass as it is said, 'and the similitude of the Lord doth he behold'" (Num. 12:8).[1]

The Rabbis assert that one must possess specific qualifications before he can become a prophet. Thus they say, "The Shechinah (Holy Spirit) rests only on one who is wise, strong, wealthy, tall and humble."[2] It will appear rather strange upon first thought that strength, wealth, and height should be included among the requirements for the prophetic calling, but as Maharsho, one of the commentators of the Talmud says, the Rabbis felt that these qualities were necessary for the prophet in order that he might exert a powerful influence upon the people in turning their hearts to penitence.

The prophetic calling was not limited to the male

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[1]Jebamoth, 49b.

[2]Shabbath, 92a; Nedarim, 38a.

sex, nor was it limited to members of the Jewish race. According to a Baraita (external Mishnah) Israel had forty-eight prophets and seven prophetesses.[1] R. Elijah said, "I call to witness heaven and earth that one may be Jew or Gentile, man or woman, man-servant or maid-servant--only according to his deeds will the Holy Spirit rest upon him.[2]

One must live a definite kind of life in order that the Holy Spirit may visit an individual. R. Pinhas enumerates the preliminary stages which finally elevate one to the status of a prophet. Thus he says, "The Torah leads to prudence, prudence leads to vigilance, vigilance leads to cleanliness, cleanliness leads to purity, purity leads to separateness, separateness leads to holiness, holiness leads to humility, humility leads to fear of sin, fear of sin leads to Chasiduth (saintliness), Chasiduth leads to the Holy Spirit."[3]

According to the Rabbis, the Shechinah must first rest upon one in Palestine, and not in any other country. Because of this view we find the modern critics at variance with the opinion of the Rabbis regarding the place where Ezekiel first began his prophecy. According to the modern critics it was in Babylon that Ezekiel began his ministry. The Rabbis, however, affirm that Ezekiel was already a prophet in Palestine before he went into exile, for otherwise the Shechinah would never have

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[1]Megillah, 14a.

[2]Tanna d'be Eliahu, 8.

[3]Abodah Zarah, 20b.

rested upon him in exile.[1]

The function of the prophet was to strengthen the faith of the people and exhort them to fulfill the commandments of the Torah. According to the modern critics the eighth century prophets were creative geniuses who propounded new ideas regarding the nature of God and what He required of His people. The Rabbis, on the other hand, hardly credit the prophets with any originality at all. The prophets had no right to make any innovation in the Law, for the Torah says, "These are the commandments" (Leviticus 27:34), implying thereby that no new ones may be added.[2] The Torah also said in this connection, "Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish from it" (Deut. 4:2). The doctrine of progressive revelation has no place in Rabbinic thinking. The revelation to Moses was complete and final. The prophets were merely to reiterate and emphasize what had already been said by Moses. And when one considers that from the viewpoint of the Rabbis the Books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy are of Mosaic authorship, just as are the other books of the Pentateuch, and not the writings of the sixth and seventh centuries B. C., as is maintained by the modern critics, much of the originality that is attributed to the eighth century prophets will be found to be unwarranted. It is true that the prophets often amplify the ideas expressed in the Pentateuch and clothe them in picturesque language, but the germ of the idea will be

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[1]Moed Koton, 25a.

[2]Shabbath, 104a.

found to be not original with the prophet. According to the Baraita that was referred to above, the forty-eight prophets and seven prophetesses who prophesied to Israel added nothing and took away nothing from what has been written in the Torah. The only exception to that is the reading of the roll of Esther.[1]

In a rather strange Midrash, R. Eleazar says that Moses and Joshua were the only two prophets who knew what they were prophesying. To prove that Moses knew what he was prophesying, the Rabbi quotes the passage in which Moses said of himself, "My doctrine shall drop as the rain, my speech shall distil as the dew" (Deut. 32:2). In the case of Joshua, the Rabbi offers no proof for his statement. R. Joshua adds that Elihu also knew what he was prophesying for he is quoted as saying, "and that which my lips know, they shall speak sincerely. The spirit of God hath made me, etc." (Job 33:3-4). On the other hand, Samuel, who is regarded as the greatest of the early prophets, did not know what he was prophesying, for in the course of his address to the people of Israel he said, "And the Lord sent Jerubbaal, and Bedan, and Jephthah, and Samuel" (1 Sam. 12:11). Had he known what he was prophesying he would have said "and me" instead of "and Samuel." The inference is therefore made that Samuel was merely uttering the words which God had put in his mouth without knowing himself what he was saying.[2]

In commenting on the passage, "And the king took his

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[1]Megillah, 14a.

[2]Midrasch Tehillim, 90, 4.

ring from his hand, and gave it unto Haman (Esther 3:10), R. Abba said, "The removal of the ring was greater (more effective) than the forty-eight prophets and seven prophetesses who prophesied to Israel, for the prophets and prophetesses did not succeed in making Israel repent for her sins, whereas the removal of the ring immediately made Israel penitent as it is said, 'there was great mourning among the Jews, and fasting, and weeping and wailing; and many lay in sackcloth and ashes'" (Esther 4:3).[1]

Though the prophet had no right to make any innovation in the Law, it nevertheless appears from at least one passage in the Talmud that if for some reason or other the prophet should tell the people to violate a Biblical law, they should carry out his command. The only exception to this is in the case of idolatry. R. Abuhe says, "In all cases if a prophet tells you to violate a Biblical law, listen to him, with the exception of the worship of idols, in which case, even if he makes the sun stand in the middle of the firmament, do not listen to him."[2]

According to another passage in the Talmud the prophets had the power to nullify judgments which were pronounced upon Israel by Moses. R. Yose says, "Four judgments which were ordained upon Israel by Moses were later nullified by four different prophets. Moses said: 'And Israel dwelleth in safety, the fountain of Jacob alone (Deut. 33:28); Amos came and nullified it as it is written, 'Cease, I beseech Thee' etc., and then it says 'The Lord repented

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[1]Megillah, 14a.

[2]Sanhedrin, 90a.

concerning this' etc. (Amos 7:5-6). Moses said: 'And among these nations shalt thou have no repose' (Deut. 28:65); Jeremiah came and said, 'Even Israel, when I go to cause him to rest' (Jeremiah 31:1). Moses said: 'Visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children' (Exodus 34:7); Ezekiel came and nullified it as it is written, 'The soul that sinneth, it shall die' (Ezekiel 18:4). Moses said: 'And ye shall perish among the nations' (Leviticus 26:38); Isaiah came and said, 'And it shall come to pass in that day, that a great horn shall be blown; and they shall come that were lost in the land of Assyria' etc. (Isaiah 27:13)."[1]

R. Isaac says that though a number of prophets often received exactly the same prophecy, yet no two prophets employed the same style when they delivered it to the people. To give an illustration we find Obadiah saying, "The pride of thy heart hath beguiled thee" (1:3). Jeremiah, on the other hand, said the same thing, but in somewhat different phraseology. He said, "Thy terribleness hath deceived thee, even the pride of thy heart" (49:16).[2]

From the passage in Job (28:25), "When He maketh a weight for the wind" (spirit), R. Acha deduces that even the Holy Spirit which rests upon the prophets rests only according to a certain weight, that is, in a certain proportion. "The prophecies of some are contained in one book, of others in two books, while in certain cases there may not be any more than two verses." Another

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[1]Maccoth, 24a.

[2]Sanhedrin, 89a.

Rabbi remarked on the same passage in Job, "Each prophet was given the Holy Spirit in accordance with his strength" (spiritual capacity).[1]

R. Ula lays down some general rules regarding the prophets. He says, "Whenever a prophet's name is mentioned and also the name of his father, then it is an indication that he is a prophet and also the son of a prophet; if only his own name is mentioned and not the name of his father, then only he is a prophet and his father is not; if his name is mentioned and also the name of his city, then we know that he is a prophet from that particular city; if, however, only his name is mentioned but not the name of his city, then it is an indication that he is from Jerusalem."[2]

According to one passage in the Talmud there arose in Israel a host of prophets, twice as many as the number of Jews that went out of Egypt. The reason, however, why the prophecies that we have are not more voluminous is that only those prophecies that were also relevant to succeeding generations were committed to writing, while those that applied only to the generation in which the prophet lived were never written down.[3]

The Rabbis tell us that the prophet is known by ten different names. They are as follows: (1) minister, (2) faithful, (3) servant, (4) messenger, (5) seer (hozeh), (6) seer (zofeh),

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[1]Leviticus R. 15; Yalkut Shimeoni on Job.

[2]Megillah, 15a.

[3]Megillah, 14a.

(7) seer (rock), (8) angel, (9) prophet, (10) man of God.[1]

In the opinion of a number of the Biblical critics all the prophetic utterances that have in them an element of hope and comfort are post-exilic. Practically all of them are agreed that the five concluding verses of the Book of Amos have been interpolated by a post-exilic writer. The Rabbis, however, would never agree to such a theory. To them, it is quite natural and even imperative that the prophets should close their prophecies with a message of hope for Israel. Israel was to them an eternal people, and her ultimate destiny could not be doom and destruction, but rather a rejuvenated and regenerated Israel. Thus the Rabbis say very clearly, "All the prophets open with judgment and close with comfort."[2]

The Rabbis affirm that with the death of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi the Holy Spirit was taken away from Israel and the voice of prophecy was stilled forever.[3] The Rabbis do not say whether there will be any prophets in the Messianic era. They probably felt that prophets will not be needed then, for all the people will be like prophets.

To sum up, then, the Rabbinic view of prophecy is to say that God reveals himself at certain periods to men who are imbued with high ideals and with a profound love for God and His commandments in order that they in turn may reveal the will of God to the

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[1]Aboth de Rabbi Nathan, 34, 7.

[2]Talmud of Jerusalem, Berachoth, 8.

[3]Yomah, 9b; Sotah, 48a.

rest of the world. God puts His words into the mouth of the prophet, and the prophet conveys them to the proper channels. The prophet is essentially the messenger and servant of God. He is the mediator between God and His people. He is the instrument through which God makes His will known to the people. He is the one whose responsibility it is to bring the people closer to God and His Torah.

Chapter 2.

Hosea.

If I were to deal chronologically with the modern interpretation of the eighth century prophets I would obviously begin with a study of Amos, for it is generally agreed amongst the Biblical scholars of today that Amos was the first of the literary prophets. Dealing as I am, however, with the Rabbinic interpretation of these prophets, Hosea must be given first consideration if I am to deal with them in the order in which they prophesied.

On the opening verse in Hosea ("The word of the Lord that came unto Hosea the son of Beeri, in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah"), the Rabbis say that there were four prophets who prophesied contemporaneously, that Hosea was the oldest of them, and that he was also the first to begin to prophesy as it is said, "First the Lord spoke with Hosea" (1:2). Some one then asked, "Is it possible that God first revealed himself to Hosea? Where there not many prophets who followed Moses but who antedated Hosea?" And in reply R. Jochanan said, "Hosea was the first of the four prophets who prophesied in that period and they are: Hosea, Isaiah, Amos and Micah."[1]

As George Foot Moore says, the Rabbis recognized Hosea as the great exponent of the doctrine of repentance.[2]

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[1]Pesachim, 87a.

[2]G. F. Moore, Judaism, Vol. 1, P. 501

Thus they say, "All the prophets call Israel to repentance, but not like Hosea."[1] Solomon Schechter points out that it is from Hosea that the Rabbis learn that regardless of the multitude of one's sins, God in His mercy is always ready to forgive the sinner if only he repents.[2] When David, and later on Ezra, said, "Our iniquities are increased over our heads and our trespass is grown up to the heavens" (Psalms 38:5; Ezra (:C), the Lord replied,"Fear not because of this thing, even if they (the sins) reached the very heaven, and if you do repentance, I will forgive; and not only the first heaven---but even if they reached the very Throne of Glory, and if you will do repentance, I will receive you at once, as it is said, 'O Israel, return unto the Lord thy God' (Hosea 14:2)."[3] In this connection also R. Levi says, "Great is repentance for it reaches the very Throne of Glory, as it is written, 'Return, O Israel, unto the Lord thy God' (Hosea 14:2)."[4] The thought conveyed is that repentance is great because it implies a reconciliation and a renewal of fellowship with God.

In appraising the character of Hosea, the Biblical critics all seem to be in agreement that more than any other prophet, Hosea was literally overflowing with tenderness and sympathy for God's chosen people. His heart was veritably breaking when he saw how Israel was alienating herself from God. Israel's

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[1]Pesikta Rabbati, 183b.

[2]S. Schechter, Some Aspects of Rabbinic Theology, P. 325.

[3]Pesikta Rabbati, 155a.

[4]Yoma 86a.

apostasy and disloyalty caused him infinite pain and made him an exceedingly sad man.

The Rabbis, on the other hand, present Hosea in an entirely different light. They say that God rebuked Hosea for refraining from praying for Israel. Hosea lacked that self-sacrificing spirit which prompted Moses to say, when God threatened to destroy Israel in the wilderness, "Blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written" (Exod. 32:32).[1]

It is in the following dialogue which the Rabbis relate took place between God and Hosea that the latter is portrayed in such an unfavorable light. "God said to Hosea, 'Your children (the children of Israel) have sinned.' Hosea should have replied, 'They are <u>your</u> children! They are the children of your grace, the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; have compassion upon them.' Hosea, however, did not only neglect to plead thus for Israel but instead he replied to God, 'Does not the whole world belong to Thee? Exchange them for another people.' The Lord then said, 'What shall I do with this elder? I am going to tell him to go and take for himself a woman of harlotry who will give birth to children of harlotry, and then I am going to tell him to send her away. If he will be able to send her away, why then I shall also send Israel away,' as it is said, 'And the Lord said to Hosea, go and take unto thee a wife of harlotry' etc., and then it says, 'And he went and took Gomer, the daughter of Diblaim' (Hosea 1:2-3)."[2] Tosvoth, a commentary on the Talmud,

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[1]Pesachim, 87a.

[2]Pesachim, 87a.

remarks that it is because of the strange command that God gave Hosea to take unto himself a wife of harlotry that the Rabbis surmised that such a dialogue must have taken place between them.

In the same temper of reproach God said to Hosea after two sons and one daughter were born to him, "Should you not have taken an example from your teacher Moses? As soon as I spoke to him he withdrew from his wife. Similarly you should have withdrawn from your wife." Hosea then replied, "Oh, Lord, I have children from her and I cannot send her away or divorce her." And the Lord said, "If, though your wife is a harlot and your children are children of harlotry and you do not know whether they are yours or someone else's, you nevertheless feel that you cannot send your wife away, then how am I to feel towards the children of Israel who are my children, the children of my choice, the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and yet you say, 'exchange them for another people.'" Realizing that he had sinned, Hosea began to plead to God that He have mercy upon him, but God said to him that rather than plead for mercy in his own behalf, he ought to plead for Israel upon whom there have been ordained three judgments because of him. Hosea then began to plead for Israel, succeeded in warding off the judgments, and soon began to bless Israel as it is said, "Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea (Hosea 2:1) ----And I will sow her unto Me in the land.....and I will say to them that were not My people: 'Thou art My people' (Hosea 2:25)."[1]

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[1]Pesachim, 87b.

There is a great difference between the view of the critics and that of the Rabbis regarding the length of Hosea's ministry. The critics regard the superscription which states that Hosea prophesied during the reign of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah as spurious. According to them the ministry of Hosea lasted less than fifteen years. The Rabbis, however, accept the superscription as authentic, and in their opinion, the ministry of Hosea lasted for forty years, beginning with the end of the reign of Uzziah, and closing with the beginning of the reign of Hezekiah.[1]

The Rabbis tell us the interesting fact that Beeri, the father of Hosea, was also a prophet and left two prophetic utterances, but because they were not sufficient to form a separate book, they were incorporated in the Book of Isaiah. These utterances make up the nineteenth and twentieth verses of the eighth chapter of Isaiah.[2]

Hosea, according to the Rabbis, belonged to the tribe of Reuben, and just as Reuben was the oldest of the tribes, so was Hosea the oldest of the prophets as it is said, "First the Lord spoke with Hosea" (Hosea 1:2). God said to Reuben, "You were the first to plead for repentance when your brothers wanted to kill Joseph; as you live, a descendant of yours will be the first to plead with Israel for repentance," as it is said, 'Come

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[1]Leviticus R. 15, 2.

[2]Ibid.

let us return unto the Lord' (Hosea 6:1).[1]

The Rabbis deduced that prayer takes the place of sacrifice from Hosea 14:3 which reads as follows: "Take with you words, and return unto the Lord; say unto Him: 'Forgive all iniquity, and accept that which is good; so will we render for bullocks the offering of our lips.'" R. Abahu said, "What shall replace the bullocks we formerly offered to Thee? 'Our lips,' the prayer we pray to Thee."[2]

R. Jochanan ben Zakkai was one day going out of Jerusalem accompanied by his disciple, R. Joshua ben Hananiah. Upon seeing the temple in ruins, R. Joshua exclaimed, "Woe unto us, for the place where the iniquities of Israel were atoned for is destroyed!" R. Jochanan consoled him by saying, "Do not grieve, my son, for we have an atonement which is just as good, namely, 'Gemilluth Hasadim' (deeds of mercy, the charity that has a personal character) as the prophet says, 'For I desire mercy and not sacrifice' (Hosea 6:6)."[3]

David, according to the Rabbis, will be the central figure in the future restoration of Israel just as he was in the golden age of the nation in the past. In commenting on Hosea 3:5 ('The Israelites will return and seek the Lord their God and David their king'), the Rabbis say, "This is the king Messiah. If he comes from among the living, David is his name, and if

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[1]Genesis R. 82, 12; 84, 18.

[2]Pesikta Shuvah, 165b.

[3]Aboth de R. Nathan, 4, 5.

from those that sleep, David is his name,"[1] that is, it will be David himself.

In different parts of the Bible God is tenderly represented as the father of Israel. R. Judah ben Ila 'i says on Exod. 14:19 (' The angel of God who went before the camp of Israel removed and went behind them'): "A rich verse the idea of which is found in many places. It is like a man who was walking on the way and letting his son go on before him; when robbers came in front to take the boy captive, the father put the son behind him; when a wolf came from behind, he put him in front; when robbers came in front and wolves behind, he took him up in his arms; when he began to be troubled by the heat of the sun, his father stretched his own garment over him; when he was hungry, he gave him food, when thirsty, he gave him to drink. Just so God did, as it is written, 'When Israel was a child then I loved him' etc. (Hosea 11:1-3)."[2]

The Rabbis have occasionally deduced both positive and negative commandments from prophetic passages. Thus R. Eleazar says that he who counts or takes the census of the Jewish people thereby violates a prohibition of Scripture for the prophet says, "Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea, which cannot (may not) be measured" (Hosea 2:1). R. Nachman says that such a person violates two prohibitions for the prophet said, "which cannot be <u>measured</u> nor <u>numbered</u>."[3]

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[1]Jer. Berachoth, 5a.

[2]Mechilta, Beshallach 4.

[3]Yoma, 22b.

R. Huna remarks that one should not hurry when he is leaving the synagogue so as not to give people the impression that he is glad to get away from the house of God. R. Abaye then observes that that is only true when departing from the synagogue, but when one is on his way to the synagogue, he should on the contrary increase his pace, for it is said, "And let us know, let us pursue to know the Lord" (Hosea 6:3).[1]

R. Rav makes an observation that the doctrine of 'Zachuth Aboth' (The Merits of the Patriarchs), which acts as an atonement for the sins of Israel, was only effective up to the days of Hosea, for it is said, "And now will I uncover her shame in the sight of her lovers, and none shall deliver her out of my hand" (Hosea 2:12). The Merits of the Patriarchs will no longer be able to save Israel.[2]

R. Eleazar says, "God drove Israel into exile among the Gentiles in order that proselytes may be added to them for it is said, 'And I will sow her unto Me in the land' (Hosea 2:25). Surely, when one sows a 'Sa 'a,' he expects to reap many 'Kurin' (a kind of measure)."[3] Similarly, God expects many of the Gentiles to embrace the religion of Israel.

R. Eleazar also says, "The reason why God chose Babylon when He drove Israel into exile is because Babylon is as deep as the nether-world, as it is said, "I shall ransom them from

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[1]Berachoth 6b.

[2]Shabbath, 55b.

[3]Pesachim 87b.

the power of the nether-world, I shall redeem them from death" (Hosea 13:14).[1]

The Rabbis often drew an analogy between two different things by means of what is known in Hebrew as a 'Gezarah Shavah,' that is, by the usage of the same word in two different passages. Thus R. Jochanan says, "The day of the restoration from exile is as great as the day in which heaven and earth have been created for it is said, 'And the children of Judah and the children of Israel shall be gathered together, and they shall appoint themselves one head, and shall go up out of the land; for great shall be the 'day' of Jezreel' (Hosea 2:2). On the other hand, in Genesis 1:5 it is said, 'And there was evening and there was morning, one 'day.'"[2] In picturing the restoration the prophet uses the word 'day,' which word was also used in the story of creation--therefore the day of restoration is as great as the day of creation.

R. Eleazar says, "He who forgets a part of his learning causes his sons to go to exile as it is written, 'Seeing thou hast forgotten the law of thy God, I also will forget thy children' (Hosea 4:6)." R. Abuhe says of such a person, "He is humbled from his exalted position for it is said, 'My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge, because thou hast rejected knowledge, I will also reject thee, that thou shalt be no priest to Me' (ibid)."[3]

R. Isaac says, "We read in Hosea, 'harlotry, wine and

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[1]Pesachim 87b.

[2]Pesachim 87b.

[3]Yoma 38a

new wine take away the heart' (4:11). Why is the one called 'Yayin' (wine) and the other 'Tirosh' (new wine)? The one is called 'Yayin' because it brings 'Yelalah' (wailing) to the world, and the other is called 'Tirosh' because he who allows himself to become enticed by it becomes 'Rosh' (a pauper)."[1]

R. Eleazar says, "The giving of charity is greater than all the sacrifices as it is written, 'To do righteousness and justice is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice' (Proverbs 21:3). On the other hand, 'Gemiluth-chasadim' (personal acts of kindness) is even greater than charity for it is said, 'Sow to yourselves according to righteousness, reap according to mercy' (Hosea 10:12). When a man sows he does not know whether he will eat of its fruit or not, but when a man reaps he will surely eat the fruit thereof."[2] It follows, then, that the value of 'Gemiluth-chasadim' (mercy) exceeds that of charity (righteousness), and by far surpasses the value of sacrifices.

R. Simon ben Lokish says, "God does not chastise Israel unless he has first provided her with a cure as it is written, 'When I would heal Israel,' and then it says, 'Then is the iniquity of Ephraim uncovered' (Hosea 7:1)."

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[1]Yoma 76b.

[2]Succah 49b.

Chapter 3.

Amos.

When R. Jochanan named the four prophets who prophesied in one age it seems that he did not name them in the order in which they began to prophesy. The order he gives, as was already mentioned in the previous chapter, is: Hosea, Isaiah, Amos, and Micah. Yet Rashi, one of the outstanding commentators on the Talmud, in commenting on that passage says, "Of Amos it is said that he began to prophesy two years before the earthquake (Amos 1:1); Isaiah on the other hand received his prophetic call on the day of the earthquake as it is written, 'and the posts of the door were moved' (Isaiah 6:4)."[1] According to Rashi, then, Amos preceded Isaiah in the prophetic calling by two years.[2] As a matter of fact from the text itself, which is the best proof from the Rabbinic standpoint, it seems apparent that Amos preceded Isaiah, for of Amos it is said that he prophesied "in the days of Uzziah" (1:1), whereas Isaiah's call did not come until "the year that king Uzziah died" (6:1). In view of that we shall now give our consideration to the Rabbinic interpretation of Amos.

From the strong and forceful language that is so

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[1]Pesachim 87a.

[2]Note: According to tradition the earthquake took place on the day that King Uzziah went into the temple to burn incense to God. That was in the 27th year of his reign (11 Chronicles 26:19).

characteristic of the entire Book of Amos, and particularly from such a statement as "the land is not able to bear all his words" (7:10), one would be inclined to think that Amos must have been a very powerful and eloquent orator. How amazed one would then be to learn that according to the Rabbis Amos was a stutterer. In fact it was because of his speech defect that he was called 'Amos' which means 'stutterer' in Hebrew. The Rabbis cite an example which illustrates how difficult Amos found it to pronounce certain words. Thus, when Amos addressed himself to Amaziah he said, "ki voker onochi uvolais shikmim" (but I was a herdman, and a dresser of sycomore-trees, 7:14). For the word 'dresser' Amos said 'bolais' whereas he should have said 'bolaish,' but because of his speech defect he was not able to pronounce the word correctly. The Israelites also called Amos "Aral Sefasayim" which means "a man of uncircumcised lips," and on one occasion after they had been listening to his bitter rebukes they retorted: "Could God not find anybody else upon whom to rest His Holy Spirit than upon this stutterer?"[1]

The Talmud does not tell us very much about the life of Amos, nor does it say how he met his death. The Jewish Encyclopedia, however, points out in an article on Amos that "according to rabbinical tradition, Amos was killed by king Uzziah, who struck him on the forehead with a glowing iron."[2]

There is a Midrash which tells us that Amos was a

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[1]Leviticus R. 10; Eccles. R. 1, 1.

[2]Gedaliah ibn Yahyah, Shalshelet ha-Kabbalah, quoted by Heilprin in Seder ha-Dorot, 1. 3110.

humble man and that it was out of humility that he said to Amaziah that he was neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet (7:14), for as a matter of fact, both he and his father were prophets.[1]

The Rabbis held Amos in high esteem and considered him a prince among men. In Micah 5:4 the prophet says, "Then shall we raise against him seven shepherds, and eight princes among men." The Rabbis enumerate the eight princes as follows: Jesse, Saul, Samuel, Amos, Zephaniah, Hezekiah, Elijah, and the Messiah.[2]

According to the Rabbis Amos did not write his own book. They say that the men of the Great Assembly wrote the Book of Ezekiel, the books of the twelve minor prophets, the Book of Daniel, and the roll of Esther.[3] The men of the Great Assembly who wrote these books are according to Rashi: Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, Zerubbabel, and Mordecai. Rashi also gives us the reason why the minor prophets did not write their own books. He says, "The twelve prophets did not write their own books because their prophesies were small. When Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi came along, however, and saw that the Holy Spirit was soon to depart from Israel they wrote down in one volume their own prophecies together with the other small prophecies so that they will not go lost because of their small size."

R. Jochanan says: "The reason why Jeroboam, the son

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[1]Leviticus R. 6.

[2]Succah, 52b.

[3]Baba Bathra, 15a.

of Joash, king of Israel, received the honor of being mentioned together with the kings of Judah was because he refused to accept the slander that was cast upon Amos as it is written, 'then Amaziah the priest of Beth-el sent to Jeroboam king of Israel, saying: Amos hath conspired against thee.....for thus Amos saith: Jeroboam shall die by the sword' etc. (7:10-11). When Jeroboam heard this he said, 'Impossible! this pious man surely did not say that, and if he did, what can I do about it, he must have been told so by the Shechinah.'"[1]

R. Yose says: "When a man sins the first time he is forgiven, the second time he is forgiven, the third time he is forgiven, but when he sins the fourth time there is no more foregiveness as it is written: 'Thus saith the Lord: for three transgressions of Israel, yea, for four, I will not reverse it' (Amos 2:6)."[2]

One of the important prayers in the daily liturgy of the synagogue is known as the "Ashrai" because the prayer begins with that word. In this prayer the verses are arranged systematically according to the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, the first verse beginning with the first letter of the Alphabet, the second verse with the second letter, and so on to the end of the alphabet. There is one letter, however, which is left out and that's the letter 'nun' corresponding to the letter 'N.' R. Jochanan therefore asked why that particular letter was left out of the

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[1]Pesachim, 87b.

[2]Yoma, 86a.

prayer, and he himself replied, "The letter 'Nun' was left out of the Ashrai because of the judgment that is contained in the verse which begins with that letter as it is written (Amos 5:2), Naflah lo socif kum, bethulas yisrael' (The virgin of Israel is fallen, she shall no more rise)."[1]

The Rabbis recognised the fact that the prophecies of Amos were unusually harsh and severe. According to a Midrash on Ecclesiastes, Amos was punished because of the preponderance of doom and judgment in his prophecies. The Midrash reads as follows: "With three prophets it happened that their prophecies were turned upon themselves because of the bitterness of their words and they were: Koheleth, Jeremiah, and Amos."[2]

The practice of building a sermon or any religious message on some Scriptural text is not at all modern. The Rabbis were profuse in their use of Scripture, and always drew on the Bible for a text, no matter what the occasion may have been. When R. Isaac was called to deliver the eulogy over R. Jochanan he began by saying, "This day is as tragic for Israel as the day when the sun goes down at noon as it is written, 'and I will cause the sun to go down at noon' (Amos 8:9)."[3]

R. Asi says that he could not help but weep every time he read the verse in Amos 5:15 "Hate the evil and love the good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the Lord, the

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[1]Berachoth, 4b.

[2]Ecclesiastes R. 1.

[3]Moed Katon, 25b.

God of hosts will be gracious unto the remnant of Joseph," for despite all the pain and suffering that Israel will have to endure, the prophet is still doubtful whether there will be any hope for her.[1]

It has long been a question among the modern Biblical scholars whether the prophets condemned the entire sacrificial system 'per se,' or whether they merely found fault with the spirit in which the sacrifices were being offered by the Israelites of their day. Though the Rabbis do not say expressly what the attitude of the prophets was towards sacrifice in general, it nevertheless appears reasonably clear that according to the Rabbis the prophets never advocated the abolition of the entire institution of sacrifice, but merely admonished Israel for the superficiality of her offerings. As a matter of fact the prophets did not have the authority to denounce sacrifice as an institution for provision is made for it in the Law. On the verse in Numbers 28:6 ('It is a continual burnt-offering, which was offered in Mount Sinai'), R. Eleazar says that the Israelites were merely told at Sinai how the offering should be made, but it was not actually offered there. R. Akiba, on the other hand, says that it <u>was</u> offered at Sinai, and has never ceased to be offered since then. The question was then asked, if that be the case how can we reconcile the passage in Amos 5:25 in which the prophet says in the name of God, "Did ye bring unto Me sacrifices and offerings in the wilderness forty years, O house of Israel?" And the reply

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[1]Chagigah 4b.

is given that it was the tribe of Levi (the tribe of Levi is not included in the house of Israel) which alone did not worship any idols, that offered the burnt-offering at Sinai.[1] According to the interpretation of R. Akiba then, Amos did not mean to imply that the Israelites did not offer any sacrifices in the wilderness. He simply reminded them that because of Israel's sins in the wilderness it was necessary for the tribe of Levi to offer the burnt-offering.

Schechter points out that the call to repentance which Amos embodied in the words "Seek ye me and live" (5:4) is characterized by the Rabbis as "the sweet message."[2] In a beautiful homily, R. Simlai says of the six hundred and thirteen commandments that are contained in the Jewish Law, "David came and reduced them to eleven, 'He that walketh uprightly, and worketh righteousness, and speaketh truth in his heart. That hath no slander upon his tongue, nor doeth evil to his fellow, nor taketh up a reproach against his neighbor. In whose eyes a vile person is despised, but he honoreth them that fear the Lord; he that sweareth to his own hurt, and changeth not. He that putteth not out his money on interest, nor taketh a bribe against the innocent' (Psalms 15:2-5). Isaiah came and reduced them to six, 'He that walketh righteously, and speaketh uprightly, he that despiseth the gain of oppressions, that shapeth his hands from holding of bribes, that stoppeth his ears from hearing of blood,

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[1]Chagigah, 6a.

[2]S. Schechter, ibid. P. 324.

and shutteth his eyes from looking upon evil' (Isaiah 33:15). Then came Micah and reduced them to three, 'It hath been told thee, O man, what is good, and what the Lord doth require of thee: only to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God' (Micah 6:8). Isaiah then reduced them further to two, 'Thus saith the Lord: keep ye justice, and do righteousness' (Isaiah 56:1). Finally Amos came and reduced them all to one, 'For thus saith the Lord unto the house of Israel: seek ye me and live' (Amos 5:4)."[1]

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[1]Maccoth, 24a.

Chapter 4.

Isaiah.

As was noted in the preceding chapter Isaiah received his call to prophecy on the day of the earthquake, which was two years after Amos had received his. The Rabbis give a very graphic description of Isaiah's call. "Isaiah said: 'As I was walking about in my study I heard the voice of God saying, "Whom shall I send and who will go for us. (Isa. 6:8)? I have sent Micaiah and they struck him on the cheek; I have sent Amos and they called him 'stutterer.'" And so I said, "send me." God then said to me, "My children are burdensome and rebellious; if you are willing to be insulted and beaten by my children, then you can become my messenger, but if you are not, you cannot become my messenger." I then replied to Him, "In spite of all that, I am willing to become your messenger"' as it is written, 'I gave my back to the smiters, and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair' (50:6)." In appreciation of Isaiah's idealism and spirit of self-sacrifice, God said to him, "The other prophets received their prophecies one from the other as it is said, 'and took of the spirit that was upon him' (Numbers 11:25), but you have received yours directly from the mouth of God as it is said, 'The spirit of the Lord God is upon me' (Isa. 61:1). Similarly all the other prophets utter simple prophecies but your prophecies, especially those on comfort, are enhanced by repetition as 'Uri, Uri' (awake, awake, 51:9); 'Hisorari, Hisorari' (awake, awake, 51:17); 'Sos Asis' (I will greatly rejoice, 61:10); 'Anochi, Anochi' (I, even I, 51:12); 'Nahamu, Nahamu' (comfort ye, comfort

ye, 40:1)."[1]

Isaiah, in the mind of the Rabbis, is so closely identified with the thought of comfort that they declare that he who sees Isaiah in his dream may look forward to being comforted in time of grief.[2]

If we compare the prophetic call of Isaiah (Ch. 6) with that of Ezekiel (Ch. 1), we find that the latter's description of the Divine Glory was far more vivid and elaborate than the relatively simple description of Isaiah. One might, therefore, justly conclude that Ezekiel must have occupied a higher place in the realm of prophecy than did Isaiah, and that that is the reason why his visions of the Divine Glory were clearer. R. Rave, however, assures us that that is not so. Thus he says, "Isaiah saw all that Ezekiel saw, only Ezekiel is like the villager who sees the king whereas Isaiah is like the city-bred who sees the king."[3] In other words, Ezekiel was a prophet of lesser greatness and the majesty of God completely overwhelmed him as he himself said, "And when I saw it, I fell upon my face" (1:28); Isaiah, on the other hand, being a prophet of greater rank, felt much more at ease in the presence of God.

The Rabbis tell us that Amoz, the father of Isaiah, was a brother of Amaziah, king of Judah. It follows from that that Isaiah was a descendant of David and therefore belonged to the tribe

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[1]Leviticus R. 10, 2.

[2]Berachoth, 57f.

[3]Chagigah, 13b.

of Judah. In fact, the Talmud expressly says that Isaiah was a descendant of Judah and Tamar. Regarding the kinship between Amoz and Amaziah, R. Levi says, "We have a tradition from our ancestors that Amoz and Amaziah were brothers.[1] The Talmud also affirms that Amoz, too, was a prophet.[2]

Though the Rabbis considered Isaiah as one of the greatest of the prophets, they nevertheless assert that God punished him because he had sinned against the children of Israel when he said of them, "And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips" (6:5). When God heard him say that he said, "There is no one whose love is greater for me than Isaiah and yet when he declared, 'I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips' I said to him, 'You may say that of yourself but not of Israel.'"[3]

With regard to the death of Isaiah, R. Simon ben Azai said, "I found a genealogical register in Jerusalem in which it was stated that Manasseh killed Isaiah." R. Rave adds to that by saying that Manasseh had pointed out to Isaiah that several of his prophecies had contradicted the words of Moses, and it was for that reason that he had him put to death. "He put him on trial and then had him killed. Manasseh said to Isaiah, 'Your teacher Moses said, "for man shall not see Me and live" (Exod. 33:20), and you said, "I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne high and lifted up" (Isa. 6:1); your teacher Moses said, "Who is as the Lord our God whensoever we call upon Him" (Deut. 4:7), and you said "Seek ye

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[1]Sotah, 10b.

[2]Megillah, 15a.

[3]Song of Songs R. 1, 6.

the Lord when He may be found" (55:6); your teacher Moses said, "The number of thy days I will fulfil" (Exod. 23:26), and you said "And I will add unto thy days fifteen years" (38:5). Isaiah then said to himself, 'I know that he will not accept anything that I may say in my defence, so why should I increase his guilt?' He uttered the name of God and was swallowed up by a cedar-tree. Manasseh then ordered his men to saw across the cedar and when the saw reached Isaiah's mouth he died because he had said of Israel, 'And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips' (6:5)." Some one then asked, "How can you really reconcile Isaiah's assertion 'And I saw God' with the statement of Moses that no man shall see God and live?" And the Talmud replied, "All the prophets looked through dim spectacles whereas Moses looked through clear ones."[1] Rashi explains the words of the Rabbis and says that all the prophets looked through dim spectacles and therefore thought that they saw God but really did not; Moses, on the other hand, looked through clear spectacles and therefore knew that he did not see God.

Unlike the modern critics who affirm that Isaiah wrote only chapters 1-39 and that the rest of the book was written by a Deutero-Isaiah and a Trito-Isaiah, the Rabbis took it for granted that the entire book is a unit and that it all comprises the prophetic utterances of one man. As was observed in the introductory chapter, the words of comfort that the prophet offers to the people in exile are, from the Rabbinic standpoint, no indication that they

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[1]Jebamoth, 49b.

must have been uttered after the destruction of the Temple. Isaiah, as a prophet, knew that the Israelites were going to be driven into exile, and lest they despair while they were there, he sought to console them by assuring them that the exile was only temporary, and that after a while God was going to restore them to Palestine.

As for the actual writing of the Book of Isaiah, however, the Rabbis say that it was written by Hezekiah and "his company."[1] Rashi explains that Isaiah did not write his own book because it was customary for the prophets to write their books just before their death and Isaiah was unexpectedly put to death by Manasseh, thus he was deprived of the opportunity to commit his prophecies to writing. Tosvoth observes at this point that the Rabbis ascribe the writing of the Book of Isaiah to Hezekiah because he influenced "his company" to study Torah, but as a matter of fact he could not have written it for he died before Isaiah, since Isaiah was killed by Hezekiah's son, Manasseh, when the latter was already king.

R. Dimi says that Isaiah pronounced eighteen judgments upon Israel, and not until he said to them "The child shall behave insolently against the aged, and the base against the honorable" (3:5), was he satisfied.[2] The eighteen judgments are contained in the first four verses of chapter three.

There is an interesting account in the Talmud of a conflict which took place between Isaiah, the prophet, and Hezekiah,

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[1]Baba Bathra, 15a.

[2]Chagigah, 14a.

the king. The cause of the conflict revolved around the delicate question as to who occupied the more exalted position and who was consequently to pay his respects to the other. R. Hamnuna begins his description of the clash with an interpretation of Ecclesiastes 8:1 ('Who is as the wise man? and who knoweth the interpretation of a thing?'), "Who is as God who knows how to make peace between two righteous men, between Hezekiah and Isaiah? Hezekiah said, 'Isaiah should come to see me just as Elijah went to see Ahab as it is written, "And Elijah went to show himself unto Ahab" (1 Kings 18:2).' Isaiah, on the other hand, said 'Hezekiah should come to see me for did not Jehoram, the son of Ahab, go to see Elisha' (11 kings 3:12)? In order to settle the controversy God caused Hezekiah to become ill and then said to Isaiah, 'Go and visit Hezekiah who is ill' as it is written, 'In those days was Hezekiah sick unto death. And Isaiah the prophet the son of Amoz came unto him, and said unto him: "Thus saith the Lord, set thy house in order; for thou shalt die, and not live"' (Isa. 38:1). What did God imply by the repetition 'for thou shalt die and not live?' He implied that 'thou shalt die in this world and not live in the next world.' Hezekiah then asked, 'Why is my punishment so severe?' and Isaiah replied, 'because you did not fulfill the commandment regarding reproduction.' Hezekiah then said, 'I brought no children into the world because I saw by means of the Holy Spirit that my children were not going to be righteous.' And Isaiah replied, 'You should do as you are commanded and leave the rest to God who will conduct things as He sees fit.' Hezekiah then said, 'Let me have your daughter in marriage and perhaps because of your 'Zachuth'

(merit) and my 'Zachuth' I will have children that are righteous.' To that Isaiah replied, 'The judgment has already been pronounced upon you that you must die.' Hezekiah then said, 'Son of Amoz! finish your prophecy and go. I have a tradition from my forefathers that even if there is a sharp sword lying across the neck of a person he should not hesitate to appeal to the mercy of God.'"[1]

We see from what Isaiah said to Hezekiah that it is the duty of every man to marry and bring children into the world. Marriage was considered not only as the normal state, but as a divine precept. In Genesis 1:28 it is said, "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth," and in Isaiah 45:18 "He created it not a waste, He formed it to be inhabited."[2]

R. Huna says: "God crushes with suffering those who have found favor in His eyes as it is written, 'Yet it pleased the Lord to crush him by disease' (Isa. 53:10)."[3]

The modern Biblical scholars have had a good deal to say about the 'Suffering Servant' with whom Isaiah deals in chapters 52 and 53. Some interpret the servant as an individual, while others say that it should be interpreted as representing 'collective Israel.' The Rabbis, on the other hand, seem to think that the servant represents an individual, though they are not agreed as to who that individual is. G. F. Moore points out that the Sifre on Numbers 25:13 ('Because he was jealous for his God,

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[1] Berachoth, 10a.

[2] Gittin, 41b.

[3] Berachoth, 5a.

and made atonement for the children of Israel'), applies to Phinehas (Isa. 53:12), 'Because he bared his soul unto death.'[1]

R. Simlai applied the same verse to Moses. "'I will divide him a portion among the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the mighty': Like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who were mighty in the Law and commandments. 'Because he bared his soul unto death': Because he gave himself over to death, as it is written, 'And if not, blot me, I pray Thee, out of Thy book which Thou hast written' (Exod. 32:32). 'And was numbered with the transgressors': He was numbered with those who died in the wilderness. 'Yet he bore the sin of many': Because he made atonement in the incident of the golden calf. 'And made intercession for the transgressors': Because he sought mercy for the transgressors of Israel that they might turn again in repentance."[2]

Moore points out, however, that "it would be a misunderstanding of the whole method of midrash to say that the Rabbis interpreted the passage in Isaiah of Phineas or of Moses. The opening verses (52:13-15) they not unnaturally referred to the Messiah, but they felt no constraint to extend this interpretation to the following. Similarly, if 53:12 reminded them of Phineas or of Moses, it did not draw the preceding verses with it. Nor had such an application of the verse any other authority than its plausibility; whoever could suggest another was free to display

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[1]G. F. Moore, Judaism Vol. 1, P. 549

[2]Sotah, 14a.

his ingenuity by doing so."[1]

The observance of the Sabbath is regarded by the Rabbis as one of the pillars of the Jewish faith. Its importance lies in the fact that it serves as a testimony to the people of the earth that God is the creator of the universe. R. Jochanan deduces from a passage in Isaiah that if the entire Jewish people were to observe two Sabbaths in accordance with the Law they would immediately be redeemed as it is written, "For thus saith the Lord concerning the eunochs that keep My Sabbaths....and I shall bring them to My holy mountain, and make them joyful in My house of prayer" (54:4, 7).[2]

The Rabbis lay a great deal of stress upon the tribute that should be paid to the deceased, particularly when the latter is a student of the Law. Thus R. Jochanan declares that he who fails to mourn over the death of a scholar will be punished 'measure for measure' and his own days will be curtailed as it is written, "In full measure, when Thou sendest her away, Thou dost contend with her (Isa. 27:8).[3]

There are many passages in Scripture that the Rabbis do not interpret literally. They allow for figures of speech and hyperboles. Thus R. Jochanansays in referring to the passage, "And the Lord said: 'like as My servant Isaiah hath walked naked and barefoot to be for three years a sign and a wonder upon Egypt and

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[1]Judaism Vol. 3, P. 166.

[2]Shabbath, 118a.

[3]Shabbath, 105b.

upon Ethiopia'" (20:3), "'naked,' with worn out clothes, and 'barefoot' with torn shoes."[1]

The Rabbis were very warmly attached to the land of Palestine, and the final destruction which came at the hands of the Romans left them as personal mourners. Each Rabbi then attempted to find the real reason for the tragedy. Thus R. Abuhe said, "Jerusalem was destroyed because the people neglected to recite the 'Shema' (the prayer affirming the unity of God) in the morning and evening as it is written, 'Woe unto them that rise up early in the morning, that they may follow strong drink....And the harp and the psaltery, the tabret and the pipe, and wine, are in their feasts; but they regard not the work of the Lord....Therefore My people are gone into captivity, for want of knowledge' (5:11-13)."[2] The underlying cause of the destruction, then, according to this Rabbi was the lack of faith in God.

R. Isaac says: "Jerusalem was destroyed because the people made no distinction between the common man and the leader as it is written, 'And it was, as with the people, so with the priest....The earth shall be utterly emptied, and clean despoiled' (24:2-3)."[3]

The Rabbis did not despair, however, over the fate of Jerusalem. They were confident that the land was going to be rehabilitated. God would not allow it to remain desolate indefinitely.

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[1] Shabbath, 114b.

[2] Shabbath, 119b.

[3] Shabbath, 119b.

What concerned the Rabbis, however, was what Israel must do in order to hasten the restoration, and R. Ula, in offering his solution, declares that "only through righteousness will Jerusalem be restored as it is written, 'Zion shall be redeemed with justice, and they that return of her with righteousness' (1:27)."[1]

Similarly R. Judah said: "Great is righteousness for it hastens the deliverance as it is written, 'Keep ye justice, and do righteousness; for My salvation is near to come' (Isa. 56:1)."[2]

The Rabbis always urged the people to live in Palestine rather than in another country. One Rabbi went so far as to say that "he who lives outside of Palestine, it is as if he lives without a God." R. Eleazar expressed almost the same thought when he said that "he who lives in Palestine dwells without sin as it is written, 'The people that dwell therein shall be forgiven their iniquity' (33:24)."[3]

After the destruction of the temple the centre of Torah was transferred from Jerusalem to Babylon, and the scholars of Babylon surpassed in learning those of Palestine. R. Joseph therefore says that the passage in Isaiah 27:6 ('In days to come shall Jacob take root, Israel shall blossom and bud') applies to the scholars of Babylon because "they adorn and embellish the Torah" with their wisdom.[4]

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[1]Shabbath, 139a.

[2]Baba Bathra, 10a.

[3]Kethuboth, 111a.

[4]Shabbath, 146a.

R. Chisda asks how the following two passages in Isaiah may be reconciled. In 24:23 the prophet says, "Then the moon shall be confounded, and the sun ashamed;" and in 30:26 he says, "Moreover the light of the moon shall be as the light of the sun, and the light of the sun shall be sevenfold, as the light of the seven days." One of the Rabbis replied that the first passage refers to the next world when there will be no other light than the light of the 'Shechinah,' whereas the second passage refers to the days of the Messiah when the light of the moon will be as the light of the sun.[1]

R. Sheizvey says, "A man's livelihood is as difficult as the splitting of the Red Sea." Rashi interprets that as meaning that God performs as great a miracle for an individual when He provides him with a livelihood as He did for the Israelites when He divided the Red Sea. The assertion is made on the basis of the words "He that is bent down shall speedily be loosed; and he shall not go down dying into the pit, neither shall his bread fail. For I am the Lord thy God, who stirreth up the sea, that the waves thereof roar" (51:14-15).[2]

The Rabbis strongly emphasize the value and efficacy of repentance. One should never say that it is too late for him to repent. There is a Midrash which says that "just as the sea is always open for one who wishes to cleanse himself, so the gates of

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[1]Pesachim, 68a.

[2]Pesachim, 118a.

repentance are always open to the sinner."[1] R. Eleazar in speaking of repentance said, "Repent one day before you die," and his pupils said to him, "But surely one does not know on what day he is going to die," and the Rabbi replied, "All the more reason why one should repent today lest he die on the morrow, even as Solomon said in his wisdom, 'Let thy garments be always white; and let thy head lack no oil' (Eccles. 9:8)." R. Jochanan ben Zakkai illustrated the thought further with a parable. "A king once invited his servants to a banquet, but did not specify the hour when the banquet was to begin. The wise servants immediately washed themselves, put on their best garments and were all ready for the banquet. The foolish ones, however, made no preparations but continued to do their regular work. Suddenly the king sent word that the banquet was going to begin at once. The wise servants entered the hall looking respectable and dignified, but the foolish ones came in looking unkempt and slovenly. The king welcomed the wise servants but reproached the foolish ones. 'You may all be seated at the table,' he said to the servants, 'but only those who are dressed for the occasion shall partake of the food, the others shall merely look on' as it is written, 'Thus saith the Lord God: Behold, My servants shall eat, but ye shall be hungry; behold, My servants shall drink, but ye shall be thirsty; behold, My servants shall rejoice, but ye shall be ashamed' (Isa. 65:13)."[2]

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[1]Deut. R. 2.

[2]Shabbath, 153b.

The Rabbis also tell a very interesting story about R. Eliezer ben Durdiya who in his earlier days was a heavy sinner. The time came, however, when he wanted to repent, and so he sat himself down between mountains and hills and said: "Mountains and hills! pray to God that He should be merciful to me." And they replied, "Rather than pray for you we must first pray for ourselves for it is written, 'For the mountains may depart, and the hills be removed' (Isa. 54:10)." The Rabbi then said: "Heaven and earth!. pray to God that He should be merciful to me." And they replied, "Rather than pray for you we must first pray for ourselves for it is written, 'For the heavens shall vanish away like smoke, and the earth shall wax old like a garment' (Isa. 51:6)." The Rabbi then made the same request of the sun, the moon and the stars, but they too replied that they must first pray for themselves, the sun and the moon quoting the passage, "Then the moon shall be confounded, and the sun ashamed" (Isa. 24:23), and the stars, "And all the host of heaven shall moulder away" (Isa. 34:4). The Rabbi then said, "The thing depends entirely upon myself." He put his head between his knees and wept until he expired. A voice was then heard from heaven which said: "R. Eliezer ben Durdiya will have a share in the next world."[1]

R. Jonathan says: "Great is repentance for it brings deliverance nearer, as it is written, 'And a redeemer will come to Zion, and unto them that turn from transgression in Jacob' (Isa. 59:20). The redeemer will come to Zion because of those

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[1]Abodah Zarah, 17a.

that turn from transgression in Jacob."[1]

R. Jochanan says: "Great is repentance for it has the power to nullify judgments, as it is written, 'Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they seeing with their eyes, and hearing with their ears, and understanding with their heart, return, and be healed' (Isa. 6:10)."[2]

The same Rabbi also said: "What is the significance of the statement, 'For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery with iniquity' (Isa. 61:8)?" He answers the question by relating the following parable. "A certain king was one day walking by the building where his subjects pay their taxes and he said to his servants, 'Give my tax to the collectors inside.' The servants were amazed and said to the king, 'Do not all the taxes belong to you?' And the king replied, 'I want the people to take an example from me that everyone should pay his taxes and that no one should attempt to evade the law.' Similarly God said, 'For I the Lord love justice etc., I want my children to follow my example in practicing honesty and righteousness.'"[3]

There is a Baraita to the effect that an individual should always be socially-minded and share in the sorrows of the community. He should not say when the community is in mourning, "I am going home to eat and drink," for it is of such an individual that the Scriptures say, "And behold joy and gladness, slaying oxen

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[1] Yoma, 86b.

[2] Rosh Hashanah, 17b.

[3] Succah, 30a.

and killing sheep, eating flesh and drinking wine--let us eat and drink for tomorrow we shall die. And the Lord of hosts revealed himself in mine ears: surely this iniquity shall not be expiated by you till ye die" (Isa. 22:13-14).[1]

It is generally agreed amongst the modern Biblical scholars that in the thinking of later Judaism, particularly after the exile, God had become transcendent, so full of majesty as to be hardly approachable. There are indeed a number of passages in the books of the later prophets that seem to substantiate that theory. If, however, R. Jochanan's conception of God is at all representative of the thinking of later Judaism, then the theory of the scholars is hardly tenable. The Rabbi says: "Wherever you find the majesty of God, there side by side, you will also find his humility. Examples of that are to be found in the Pentateuch, in the Prophets, and in the Hagiographa. In the Pentateuch it is said: 'For the Lord your God, He is God of gods, and Lord of lords, the great God, the mighty, and the awful....He doth execute justice for the fatherless and widow, and loveth the stranger, in giving him food and raiment' (Deut. 10:17-18). In the Prophets it is said: 'For thus saith the High and Lofty One that inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also that is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones' (Isa. 57:15). In the Hagiographa it is said: 'Extol Him that rideth upon the skies, whose name is the Lord; and exult ye before

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[1] Taanith, 11a.

Him. A father of the fatherless, and a judge of the widows, is God in His holy habitation' (Psalms 68:5-6)."[1]

Judaism has the reputation of being a religion with multitudinous laws. Every conceivable gesture that a man makes is governed either by a positive or negative commandment. Many, therefore, argue that that is one of the limitations of Judaism. It is too legalistic, they say. R. Chaninah seemed to think, however, that the many laws in Judaism helped to ennoble and enrich the lives of men. Thus he says: "God wanted to make Israel worthy and so he gave them a multitude of laws and commandments as it is written, 'The Lord was pleased, for His righteousness' sake, to make the teaching great and glorious' (Isa. 42:21)."[2]

R. Resh Lakish interprets the words "And draw out thy soul to the hungry" (Isa. 58:10) in the following way: "If you have nothing to offer him comfort him with words. Say to him 'My soul is in anguish because I have nothing to give you.'"[3]

On the passage 'Ye are the children of the Lord your God' (Deut. 14:1), R. Judah says: "Only when you conduct yourselves like children are you called children, not so however when your behavior is unlike that of children." R. Mair on the other hand disagrees with him and says, "You are always called children regardless of your behavior as it is written, 'A seed of evil-doers, children that deal corruptly' (Isa. 1:4)."[4] Though they

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[1]Megillah, 31a.

[2]Maccoth, 23a.

[3]Leviticus R. 34.

[4]Kidushin, 36a.

deal corruptly they are nevertheless called children.

It is sometimes charged that Judaism is very narrow in its doctrines and that it is intolerant towards non-Jews. Certainly the charge is unjustifiable with respect to its attitude towards salvation, for according to the Talmud "the righteous of all nations will have a share in the world to come." Similarly there is a Midrash which says "God makes nobody ineligible but is ready to receive everybody; the gates of heaven are always open and whosoever desires to enter may enter as it is written: 'Open ye the gates, that the righteous nation that keepeth faithfulness may enter in' (Isa. 26:2). It does not say that the priests, levites, and Israelites may enter but that the righteous nation may enter."[1] Another Midrash expressing the same thought reads, "Though his goodness, loving-kindness, and mercy are with Israel, his right hand is always stretched forward to receive all those who come into the world....as it is said, 'Unto me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear' (Isa. 45:23)."[2]

In commenting on the passage 'Woe unto them that draw iniquity with cords of vanity, and sin as it were with a cart rope' (Isa. 5:18), the Rabbis say, "In its beginning sin is like a thread of a spider's web, but it ends by becoming stout as a cart rope."[3]

The names applied to the 'Evil Yezer' who is responsible

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[1]Exodus R. 17.

[2]Mechilta, 38b.

[3]Succah, 52a.

for sin are various and indicative both of his nature and his function. R. Avira says: "The Evil Yezer has seven names. God called him 'Evil' (Gen. 8:21); Moses called him 'uncircumcised' (Deut. 10:16); David called him 'unclean' (Psalms 51:12); Solomon called him 'fiend' (Prov. 15:31); Isaiah called him 'stumbling-block' (Isa. 57:14); Ezekiel called him 'stone' (Ezek. 36:26); Joel called him the 'hidden-one' in the heart of man (Joel 2:20)."[1]

In interpreting the verse 'Arise, shine, for thy light is come' (Isa. 60:1), R. Jochanan relates the following parable: "A man was walking along the road on a dark night holding a lamp which he was not able to light. A man soon approached him and lit the lamp for him, but after he had walked for several minutes the light went out. He then met another man who also lit the lamp for him, but as previously the light did not last long. The man then said to himself, 'From now on I shall wait for no other light than the light of dawn.' Similarly Israel said to God:'We have made a 'Menorah' (candlestick) for you in the days of Moses and it was extinguished, in the days of Solomon and it was extinguished; from now on we shall wait only for your light' as it is written, 'For with Thee is the fountain of life; in Thy light do we see light' (Psalms 36:10)."[2]

R. Acha used the same verse in Isaiah as follows: "Israel is likened unto an olive as it is said, 'The Lord called thy name a leafy olive-tree, fair with goodly fruit' (Jer. 11:16);

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[1]Succah, 52a.

[2]Pesikta.

God on the other hand is referred to as possessing a lamp as it is said, 'the lamp of the Lord' (Prov. 20; 27). Just as it is customary to put oil (olive-oil) in a lamp and both together give forth light simultaneously, so God said to Israel: 'My children! because My light is your light and your light is My light, you and I will together go and bring light unto Zion' as it is written, 'Arise My light for thy light is come' (60:1)."[1] R. Acha employs the word 'Ori' as a noun which means 'my light' rather than as a verb which means 'shine.'

R. Jochanan says: "The son of David (the Messiah) will come only when the generation is either all righteous or all wicked--when the generation is all righteous as it is written, 'Thy people also shall be all righteous, they shall inherit the land forever' (Isa. 60:21)--when the generation is all wicked as it is written, 'And He saw that there was no man, and was astonished that there was no intercessor' (Isa. 59:16), and so God said: 'For Mine own sake, for Mine own sake, will I do it' (Isa. 48:11)."[2]

As a form of diversion from the mental strain of ceaseless discussion and argumentation on the 'Halacha' (legal portions) of the Talmud, the Rabbis often resorted to very fanciful interpretations of prophetic passages. It must have been in one of those moments that R. Eleazar said, "Some future day God is going to make a feast for the righteous in the garden of Eden; He will sit amongst them and each one will point with his finger and say, 'Lo, this is our God, for whom we waited, that He might save us; this

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[1]Pesikta.

[2]Sanhedrin, 98a.

is the Lord, for whom we waited, we will be glad and rejoice in His salvation.' (Isa. 25:9)."[1]

There is a Midrash which says that "the words of the Torah are likened unto water as it is written, 'Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye for water' (Isa. 55:1). Just as water extends from one end of the earth to the other, so the Torah covers the entire earth; just as water gives life to the world, so the Torah gives life to the world; just as water is free for all, so the Torah is free for all; just as water comes from heaven, so the Torah comes from heaven; just as water (rain) is accompanied by thunder, so the giving of the Torah was accompanied by thunder; just as water restores the soul, so the Torah restores the soul; just as water cleanses a man that is impure, so the Torah cleanses him who is unclean; just as water comes down drop by drop and they become large rivers, so one studies a few laws each day until he becomes like a fountain of water; just as water leaves the high places and runs down to the low places, so the Torah leaves him who is proud and clings to him who is humble; just as water cannot remain fresh in vessels of gold and silver but must be placed in earthen ones, so the Torah will remain only with him who looks upon himself as an earthen vessel; just as with water an old man is not ashamed to say to a young man 'Let me have a drink,' so with the words of the Torah an old man is not ashamed to ask a young man to teach him a chapter, a law, a verse, or even a single

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[1]Taanith, 31a.

letter; just as with water when a man does not know how to swim in it, he will eventually be swallowed up by it, so with the words of the Torah, if one does not study them and does not guide his life in accordance with them, in the end he will be swallowed up by them."[1]

R. Osheyo also uses the same verse in Isaiah to show that the knowledge of the Torah is retained only by those people who are humble. "Why," he asks, "are the words of the Torah compared to the following three liquids: water, wine, and milk as it is written, 'Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye for water....yea, come, buy wine and milk' (55:1)?" And he replies, "It is in order to teach you that just as these three liquids remain wholesome only in the cheapest vessels, so the words of the Torah are retained only by those who are humble in spirit."[2]

R. Chanina observes that this verse 'Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye for water' conflicts with another verse in Isaiah which says 'Unto him that is thirsty bring ye water' (21:14). The Rabbi then reconciles the two verses as follows: "If he is a worthy student then 'Unto him that is thirsty bring ye water'; if, however, he is unworthy then 'Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye for water.'"[3]

R. Judah says: "May the name of Joshua ben Gamla

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[1]Song of Songs R.

[2]Taanith, 7a.

[3]Taanith, 7b.

always be remembered to the good for if it were not for him the Torah would have been forgotten in Israel. Until his day, whosoever had a father was taught the Torah, but he who had no father remained without instruction, for the people followed the precept 'And ye shall teach them your children' (Deut. 11:19). From his day on, however, provisions were made that professional teachers should be available in Jerusalem in accordance with the words of the prophet 'For out of Zion shall go forth the Law' (Isa. 2:3)."[1]

[1] Baba Bathra, 21a.

Chapter 5

Micah

We have seen in the preceding chapters that the Rabbis do not agree with the modern critics with respect to the order in which the 8th century prophets prophesied. Both schools of thought are agreed however that Micah was the last of these prophets, though the Rabbis make no direct statement to that effect. It will be recalled that R. Jochanan said, "Four prophets prophesied in one age and they are: Hosea, Isaiah, Amos, and Micah." The fact that Micah is mentioned last, however, is no indication that he was the last to prophesy for, as was observed in Chapter 3, the Rabbi did not name the prophets in the order in which they prophesied. It is only from Rashi's comment on that passage that we can learn when Micah began his ministry. Thus Rashi says "Of all these prophets it is said that they prophesied in the days of Uzziah with the exception of Micah of whom it is said that he prophesied in the days of Jotham. Actually, however, Micah also prophesied in the days of Uzziah but only after the latter had already been stricken with leprosy and his son Jotham had succeeded him to the throne; that is why it says "in the days of Jotham' and not in the days of Uzziah. The other prophets however began to prophesy before Uzziah became a leper."[1] We have a clear statement then from

1. Pesachim, 87a.

Rashi that Micah was the last of the four prophets under consideration.

The references to Micah in Rabbinic literature are comparatively few. The Rabbis tell us nothing about the nature of Micah's call to prophecy or his relative standing amongst the prophets. Similarly nothing is mentioned of his personal life, his character, or the reaction of the people to his prophecies. The Rabbis neither extol him nor reproach him. The fact that they tell us so little about him is probably an indication that they did not regard him as belonging in the same class with his contemporaries.

All students of the Bible know that Micah's classic utterance is the verse in Chapter 6 which reads "It hath been told thee, O man, what is good, and what the Lord doth require of thee: only to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God" (6:8). R. Simlai also recognized the greatness of that atatement when he said that Micah reduced all the commandments of the Torah to three fundamental teachings, namely, "to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly."[1]

R. Eleazar interprets the same verse as follows: "'To do justly,' that is justice; 'and to love mercy,' that is 'Gemiluth Hasadim'; 'and to walk humbly with thy God,' that is the duty of joining the company conducting the bride to the wedding and the duty of joining the funeral procession."[2]

1: Macooth, 24a.
2. Succah, 49b.

In commenting on the passage "And many nations shall go and say: 'Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, and to the house of the God of Jacob" (Micah 4:2), R. Eleazor says: 'It does not say the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac but the God of Jacob; not like Abraham in whose case the word 'mountain' is used, as it is written 'In the mount where the Lord is seen' (Gen. 22:14), and not like Isaac in whose case the word 'field' is used, as it is written, 'And Isaac went out to meditate in the field' (Gen. 24:63), but like Jacob who called it 'house,' as it is written (Gen. 35:7) 'And he called the place El-beth-el' (the house of God)."[1]

R. Rave says: "He who passes by (overlooks) the wrongs that have been done him will have his own sins passed by as it is written 'that pardoneth the iniquity, and passeth by the transgression' (Micah 7:18); He pardons the iniquity to him who passes by the transgression."[2]

According to the Rabbis, wars, famines, and all kinds of suffering will precede the coming of the Messiah. They speak of this suffering as "the travail of the Messiah" by which is meant, not the suffering of the Messiah himself, but the general suffering which will precede his coming. The basis for this idea of the travail of the Messiah is Micah 5:1-3, particularly the words "therefore will He give them up, until the time that she who travaileth hath brought forth; then the residue of his brethren

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[1]Pesachim, 87b

[2]Megillah, 28a

shall return with the children of Israel." (5:3)[1]

R. Nehorai says: "In the generation in which the son of David comes youths will insult their elders, and elders will stand in the presence of youths. Daughter will rise up against her mother, and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law (Micah7:6). The countenance of the generation will be like a dog's for impudence; even a son will have no shame in the presence of his own father."[2]

According to R. Chana the 'Evil Yezer' is one of the four things that God regretted having created. The Rabbi deduces that from the words "that which I have made evil" (Micah 4:6).[3]

There is a Midrash which makes the following comment on the words 'Ihave also spoken unto the prophets, and I have multiplied visions' (Hosea 12:11), "God said, 'Indeed it is true that I have spoken unto the prophets but at the same time I have multiplied visions; the prophecy of one is not the same as the prophecy of the other. Amos saw me standing, Micah saw me sitting; Moses saw me as a mighty man, Daniel saw me as an old man.' That is why it is said, 'And by the ministry of the prophets have I used similitudes' (Hosea 12:11)."[4]

R. Yose says: "If you see that a generation is experiencing a great deal of suffering go and examine the judges of Israel for every judgment that has come upon the world came only because

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1. Yoma, 10a.
2. Sanhedrin, 97a.
3. Succah, 52b.
4. Yalkut Shimeoni

of the judges of Israel as it is written 'Hear this, I pray you, yeheads of the house of Jacob, and rulers of the house of Israel, that abhor justice . . . The heads thereof judge for reward, and the priests thereof teach for hire, and the prophets thereof divine for money' (Micah 3:9,11). Because of this, God will bring upon them three judgments, on the basis of their three sins, as it is written 'Therefore shall Zion for your sake be plowed as a field, and Jerusalem shall become heaps, and the mountain of the house as the high places of a forest' (3:12). Not until the evil judges will be eradicated will God cause His 'Schechinah' to rest upon Israel as it is written 'And I will turn my hand upon thee, and purge away thy dross as with lye. . . And I will restore thy judges as at the first, and thy counsellors as at the beginning (Isa. 1:25-26)."[1]

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1. Shabbath, 139a.

Chapter 6

Principles of Rabbinic Interpretation

Before we discuss the principles of Rabbinic interpretation let us consider very briefly the nature of the Talmud or the Oral Law as it is otherwise called, how and when it came into being and what its primary aim was. In his very excellent book on the Talmud, Emanuel Deutsch says "The origin of the Talmudis coeval with the return from the Babylonian captivity. One of the most mysterious and momentous periods in the history of humanity is that brief space of the Exile. What were the influences brought to bear upon the captives during that time, we know not. But this we know, that from a reckless, lawless, Godless populace, they returned transformed into a band of Puritans.....Scarcely aware before of the existence of their glorious national literature, the people now began to press round these brands plucked from the fire--the scanty records of their faith and history--with a fierce and passionate love, a love stronger even than that of wife and child. These same documents, as they were gradually formed into a canon, became the immutable centre of their lives, their actions, their thoughts, their very dreams. From that time forth, with scarcely any intermission, the keenest as well as the most poetical minds of the nation remained fixed upon them. 'Turn it and turn it again,' says the Talmud, with regard to the Bible, 'for everything is in it.' 'Search the Scriptures,'

is the distinct utterance of the New Testament.

"The natural consequence ensued. Gradually, imperceptibly almost, from a mere expounding and investigation for purposes of edification or instruction on some special point, this activity begot a science, a science that assumed the very widest dimensions. Its technical name is already contained in the Book of Chronicles. It is 'Midrash' (from darash, to study, expound)--a term which the Authorized Version renders by 'Story,' (See 2 Chron. 13:22; 24:27)."[1]

The Talmud came into being then as a result of the searching of the Scriptures. Like rain and light, the Rabbis tell us, the Torah was a gift from heaven.[2] The gift was a complete one; no part of the Torah was kept back in heaven.[3] Whatever follows is only a matter of interpretation. The principle held by the Rabbis was that the words of the Torah "are fruitful and multiply."[4] Thus R. Ishmael interprets the passage 'Is not my word like as fire? saith the Lord; and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces' (Jer. 23: 29), in the following way: "Just as a hammer will produce many sparks so a single verse may be interpreted in a number of ways."[5] The Rabbis also deduce that a single verse may have various interpretations from the passage in Psalms "God hath spoken once, twice have I heard this" (Ps. 62:12).[6]

From this it is not difficult to see how in the minds of the Rabbis everything which was ever said in the spirit of the Torah was at least potentially contained in it. Hence the well known

1. Deutsch, The Talmud, p. 19ff.
2. Genesis R. 6,4.
3. Deut. R. 8,6.
4. Chagigah, 3b.
5. Sanhedrin, 34a.
6. Ibid.

dictum that whatever a student may present as original in Biblical exegesis was already communicated to Moses on Mount Sinai.[1] The great task of the students of the Law was to bring to light the hidden treasures that are implicit in the words of the Torah.

The Talmud relates that one day R. Jochanan and R. Eleazor went to welcome their teacher R. Joshua who had just arrived in the city. When they approached him, he asked "What new thing has been said in the Beth ha-Midrash to-day?" And they replied, "We are your pupils and we drink your water." "Nevertheless," said R. Joshua, "it is impossible that there should be nothing new in the Beth ha-Midrash."[2]

Thus the students of the Law were constantly engaged in shedding light on obscure passages and in expounding the Scriptures in accordance with their own way of thinking. The fact that different points of view are expressed by the various Rabbis does not in any way diminish from the authority or validity of the interpretation. "The words of the wise are as goads, and as nails well fastened are those that are composed in collections; they are given from one shepherd.(Eccles. 12:11). In interpreting the words 'those that are composed in collections,' the Rabbis say: "These are the students of the Law who sit in colledtions (groups) and busy themselves with the Torah---some say 'clean', others say 'unclean'; some say'permissible', others say 'prohibited'; some say 'kosher', others say 'unkosher.' And if you will ask, 'How then can we know the truth?' the answer is, they are all

1. Sifre, 79b.
2. Chagigah, 3a.

'given from one shepherd.' One God has given it all and one leader has uttered it all from the mouth of God as it is written 'And God spoke all these words, saying' (Exod. 20:1). You too should make your ears receptive and your heart sympathetic to those who say 'clean' and 'unclean', 'permissible' and 'prohibited', 'kosher' and 'unkosher'."[1]

It should not be assumed, however, because of the different points of view, that the Rabbis had a free hand and an unlimited sway in interpreting the Scriptures without being bound in any way to particular rules and principles of interpretation. There is such a thing as Talmud hermeneutics, that is, a science which defines the rules andmethods for the investigation and exact determination of the meaning of the Scriptures, both legal and historical. As the Jewish Encyclopedia points out, "These rules relate to: (a) grammar and exegesis; (b) the interpretation of certain words and letters and superfluous words, prefixes, and suffixes in general; (c) the interpretation of those letters which, in certain words, are provided with points; (d) the interpretation of the letters in a word according to their numerical value; (e) the interpretation of a word by dividing it into two or more words; (f) the interpretation of a word according to its consonantal form or according to its vocalization; (g) the interpretation of a word by transposing its letters or by changing its vowels; and (h) the logical deduction of a Halaka (law) from a Scriptural text or from another law."[2]

1. Chagigah, 3b.
2. Jewish Encyclopedia, Talmud Hermeneutics.

Compilations of such hermeneutic rules were made in quite early days. The tannaitic (early Talmudic) tradition recognizes three such collections, namely: (1) the seven Rules of Hillel; (2) the thirteen Rules of R. Ishmael; and (3) the thirty-two Rules of R. Eliezer. The last mentioned are intended for Haggadic (homiletic) interpretation; but many of them are also valued for the Halacha (legal interpretation). The Rabbis who interpreted the Scriptures did so only in accordance with these specified rules.

Deutsch, in speaking of the different methods of interpretation says, "There had sprung up almost innumerable modes of "searching the Scriptures.' In the quaintly ingenious manner of the times, four of the chief methods were found in the Persian word Paradise, spelt in vowelless Semitic fashion, PRDS. Each one of these mysterious letters was taken, mnemonically, as the initial of some technical word that indicated one of these four methods. The one called P (peshat) aimed at the simple understanding of words and things, in accordance with the primary exegetical law of the Talmud, 'that no verse of the Scripture ever practically travelled beyond its literal meaning'--though it might be explained, homiletically and otherwise, in innumerable new ways. The second, R (remes), means Hint, i. e., the discovery of the indications contained in certain seemingly superfluous letters and signs in Scripture. These were taken to refer to laws not distinctly mentioned, but either existing traditionally or newly promulgated. The third, D (derush), was homiletic application of that which had been to that which was and would be, of prophetical and historical dicta

to the actual condition of things. It was a peculiar kind of sermon, with all the aids of dialectics and poetry, of parables, gnome, proverb, legend, and the rest, exactly as we find it in the New Testament. The fourth, S, stood for 'sod', secret, mystery. This was the Secret Science, into which but few were initiated. It was theosophy, metaphysics, angelology, a host of wild and glowing visions of things beyond earth."[1]

In the interpretation of the prophetic passages in Scripture, the chief method that the Rabbis employed was D (derush), or the homiletical interpretation. What interested the Rabbis most was how to derive from those passages some religious truth, some ethical teaching, or some vital message for the people of their day. The words of the prophets were not merely intended for the people of their own generation but for all generations. The principal concern of the Rabbis was, therefore, to show how these words had universal application.

As for the adequacy of Rabbinic interpretation a good deal will depend upon the individual's personal attitude regarding the authenticity of tradition. If the individual regards tradition as authentic, then the Rabbinic interpretation is not only adequate, but it is the only true interpretation. It is the interpretation which has been handed down from the days of the prophets. If, on the other hand, the individual is an historical student to whom tradition is not necessarily

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[1]Deutsch, The Talmud, p. 21ff

authentic, then he will find the Rabbinic interpretation inadequate.

There are, however, certain features in Rabbinic interpretation that will appeal to traditional and historical students alike. The chief merit of Rabbinic interpretation lies in the fact that it is the most ancient interpretation that we have. It comes from a period which is closer, in point of time, to the days of the prophets, than any other interpretation that has ever been handed down. Moreover, it is well known that the Scribes and Rabbis were for many generations in possession of Biblical interpretations and numerous traditions long before they were finally committed to writing. It is, therefore, reasonable to assume that at least some of the interpretations and traditions go back to a period not very distant from that of the prophets themselves. And even the skeptical student will concede that some of these ancient traditions may be perfectly authentic.

Critical interpretation, on the other hand, lacks the advantage of these ancient traditions. Its chief source of information is the Scriptures themselves. It is for this reason that the critical interpretation finds itself at a loss when it comes to such a question as to who wrote the various prophetic books, or when it comes to some facts about the character and lives of the prophets, other than those mentioned or implied in the Bible itself.

Another point that should be noted when considering

the adequacy of the Rabbinic interpretation of the prophets, is the predominance of the homiletical character of the interpretations. We have observed above that according to the Rabbis themselves "no verse of the Scripture ever practically travelled beyond its literal meaning," and yet many of the Rabbinic interpretations have gone far beyond the literal meaning of the prophetic passage. The answer is that the Rabbis often had special motives in interpreting Scripture. Very often the homiletical interpretations were made for the purpose of edifying and strengthening the moral and religious consciousness of the people. At other times such interpretations were made in order to stimulate hope and courage in the hearts of those who had become depressed and despondent over the future of Israel. In such cases it is obviously unreasonable to consider whether the Rabbinic interpretation is adequate or not.

On the whole, the Rabbinic interpretation will appear to the historical student too dogmatic and not sufficiently scientific. It will not impress him as being adequately analytical. The traditional student, however, will accept the Rabbinic interpretations as representing ancient traditions about whose authenticity there can be no question, and which are, therefore, not in need of a critical analysis.

Summary

The Rabbinic interpretation of Scripture finds itself at odds in various ways with that of modern Biblical criticism, chiefly because of the difference in the following two factors: (1) their attitude towards tradition; and (2) their attitude towards the text. With regard to the first, the Rabbis were essentially traditionalists; tradition to them was something sacred, something that must be held in the highest esteem. Consequently, their interpretations of Scripture must always be in accord with what has been handed down from previous generations. Under no circumstances may they contradict tradition. Very often we find in the Talmud that after a Rabbi has given a certain interpretation of some verse in Scripture he is asked what his authority is for it and he replies "Kabbalah"--tradition. That establishes the interpretation as valid and authentic.

The modern critics, on the other hand, will not accept tradition as the last word in Biblical exegesis. They start with tradition, but so soon as they find discrepancies in, and difficulties with, the traditional interpretation they relinquish it and reinterpret Scripture in accordance with their own point of view. To their mind there is nothing sacred about tradition. It is not at all infallible, and when the evidence shows that a reinterpretation is necessary they feel no compunction about abandoning the traditional viewpoint.

And what is true of the difference in attitude between the two schools towards tradition is also true with regard to the Biblical text. To the Rabbis the text is infallible. All the works of prophecy have been divinely inspired and are therefore errorless. There can be no such thing as a corrupt text. The attitude of the critics, however,

is very much different. To them the text is not infallible, and consequently they often seek to emend it when they feel that an emendation is necessary.

Another striking difference between the Rabbis and the critics with regard to the interpretation of Scripture is the matter of interpolations. The critics always regard a passage that does not seem to be in harmony with the rest of the book as a later interpolation. Thus they affirm that the latter part of the last chapter in Amos comes from the pen of a later writer on the ground that its temper is very much different from that of the rest of the book. Similarly they ascribe chapters 40-66 of Isaiah to a Deutero and Trito-Isaiah on the ground that they are exilic and post-exilic and therefore could not have been written by Isaiah. The Rabbis, however, would never subscribe to such theories. To them everything that is contained in a book of prophecy is a unit and comes from only one author.

The Rabbis regard prophecy not merely as some form of ecstasy but as a direct revelation from God. It was through the prophet that God always made His will known to the people. He was the appointed messenger of God and the mediator between God and His people.

In the opinion of the Rabbis Hosea was the first of the eighth century prophets. They deduce that from the words, "First the Lord spoke with Hosea" (Hosea 1:2). Hosea, more than any other prophet stressed the importance of repentance. It was he who uttered those great words "Return, O Israel, unto the Lord thy God; for thou hast stumbled in thine iniquity" (14:2).

Nevertheless, the Rabbis reproach Hosea for not pleading for Israel sufficiently. On one occasion Hosea even suggested to God that He exchange them for another people. Later on, however, he atoned for his sin and began to bless Israel as it is said, "Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured nor numbered" (2:1).

Amos, according to the Rabbis, followed Hosea in the prophetic calling. He was called Amos because he was a stutterer, and on one occasion when his prophecies were particularly poignant the people cried out, "Could God not find anybody else upon whom to rest His Holy Spirit than upon this stutterer?" The Rabbis praise Amos for his humility, but on the other hand they admonish him for the temper of his prophecies. They even declare that he was punished because he prophesied so much doom for Israel. The essence of religion to Amos was contained in the words, "Seek ye me and live" (5:4).

Isaiah, who came next, himself volunteered to go and preach to Israel, even though God forewarned him of the hardships and dangers that it entailed. His reply to God was, "I gave my back to the smiters and my cheeks to them that plucked off the hair" (50:6). The Rabbis greatly admired this wonderful spirit of idealism and unselfish devotion both to God and to Israel which Isaiah manifested by his proposal to become the messenger of God. Isaiah reduced all the commandments of the Torah to the following: "Keep ye justice and righteousness" (56:1).

Micah was the last of the eighth century prophets.

The Rabbis have much less to say about him than about his predecessors. He apparently was not quite as colorful and dynamic a personality as the others. He summed up the essence of the Torah by saying that God merely requires of man "to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God" (6:8).

The words of the Torah "are fruitful and multiply." They lend themselves to different interpretations. "Just as a hammer produces many sparks so a single verse may be interpreted in a number of ways." The Rabbis employed four principal methods in their interpretation of Scripture: (1) Peshat, "the simple understanding of words and things;" (2) Remes, hint, the discovery of the indications contained in seemingly superfluous letters; (3) Derush, homiletic interpretation; (4) Sod, secret, mystery. This was the Secret Science into which only the most distinguished students were initiated. The chief method that the Rabbis employed in interpreting the prophetic books was the homiletic interpretation.

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